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ABSTRACT

Australia's tertiary institutions and licensing authorities that control the right to work in various trades and professions have largely ignored the need for procedures and processes to recognize formally the knowledge that people gain in their life experiences. For this reason, the issue of assessing adult learners' life experiences for the purpose of granting them exemptions from various course work was studied and a model for conducting such assessments was developed. The assessment process uses an assessment panel consisting of people with recognized expertise in the field in question. Persons seeking certification submit portfolios and participate in assessment interviews. After having received the appropriate assessment training, the same panel assesses both portfolio and interview performance. The portfolio assessment involves checking the relevance of the competencies claimed against the outcomes of the courses from which exemption is being sought and classifying the work presented against rating scales. A structured interview and checklist are used in assessing candidates' interview performance. Provisional exemption is granted by the assessment panel, and assessment of performance continues on the job for a specified period (this is done primarily through a log book). After all of stages stages have been successfully completed, exemption is finally ratified. (MN)

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SUMMARY REPORT

THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

A study on the assessment of experiential learning

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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PETER THOMSON

Adelaide, February 1988

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1.0 LEARNING FROM THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

1.1 Experiential Learning Defined

The saying 'Experience is the best teacher' provides the framework for what follows. Our interest is in the learning which comes from living and working — part of the process we call 'experience'.

The technical term to describe the outcomes of this prccess is EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING which is defined as:

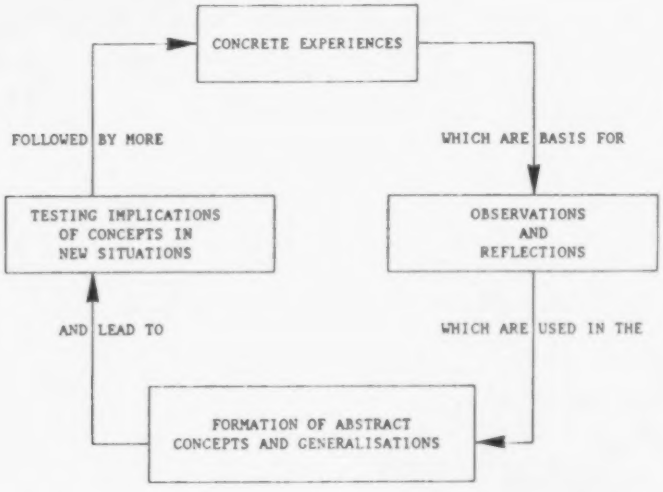
> the attributes of knowledge, skill and attitude which are acquired through life and work experience.

This, however, is a broad definition and it needs to be broken down into its two main components. The first is non-sponsored learning, that is learning acquired informally and independent of a training or educational institution. This is also known as 'learning through life experience', or more colloquially, 'learning from the school of hard knocks'.

The second broad category is sponsored learning. This is learning formally incorporated into institutional programs designed to give students more direct experience in integrating and applying knowledge. Examples are practical work or work experience done as part of a course.

1.2 The Experiential Learning Cycle

Experiential learning relies primarily on concrete experience, observation and reflection. The learning can therefore be time-consuming as the experiences, observations and reflections must be repeated often enough to allow the development of concepts and generalisations which can be tested in new situations. However, once the process is completed, what is learnt by this method is not easily forgotten. This cyclical process can be summarised by a diagram.


CONCRETE EXPERIENCES
FOLLOWED BY MORE
WHICH ARE BASIS FOR
TESTING IMPLICATIONS OF CONCEPTS IN NEW SITUATIONS
OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS
AND LEAD TO
WHICH ARE USED IN THE
FORMATION OF ABSTRACT CONCEPTS AND GENERALISATIONS

It is a characteristic of experiential learning that many people do not fully appreciate how much they have learnt. This is particularly true of people unfamiliar with the workings of the academic system.

1.3 Gaining Exemption rather than Selection for Adults

We are not much interested in experiential learning that can only be used for entry into a tertiary course. In Australia it is now fairly commonplace for tertiary institutions to set aside a small number of places for 'mature-aged entrants'. There are a variety of these schemes in existence, but none, to the author's knowledge, involves the assessment of the applicants' experiential learning. Mature-age selection is usually based on such things as entrance tests (which assess 'general ability'), essay assignments ('Why I Want to Return to Study') and interviews. Of course, selection issues cannot be entirely ignored because, although the sort of people we are considering seek exemptions, they must first get over the selection hurdle.

The people who are of interest to us are those for whom entry into the course is not in question. The only question to be answered is how much credit should be given for their experiential learning.

Although it is not drawn out as a major issue in the study, it is generally implied that the experience referred to is in some way related to age. Individuals with the types of experiences that we will be looking at tend to be adults, and therefore the learning associated with experience is largely, though not exclusively, the province of adults.

1.4 Focus of Study

In summary therefore, the type of experiential learning on which we will be focusing:

- has been acquired informally through life and work experience and is not something gained from an institutional program of education or training;
- is being assessed for the purpose of gaining exemption from part of a course and not simply to gain entry into that course; and
- is more typically associated with adults than young people.

2.0 EQUITY AND COST-BENEFIT CONSIDERATIONS

Australia's tertiary institutions and licensing authorities which control the right to work in various trades and professions have largely ignored the need for procedures and processes which give formal recognition of a person's previous experience in life.

The absence of any firm guidelines for granting such recognition raises a question of equity as it affects people like unemployed or retrenched workers seeking retraining, and women returning to paid employment. The existing policies in education and training which exclude a consideration of learning that has resulted from past experience are denying equity to these groups.

This is particularly remarkable in times like the present when urgent calls for the upgrading of the skills of our workforce are accompanied by calls for cut-backs in education spending. The recognition of prior experience is one of the few innovations that can simultaneously answer such diverse calls.

Imagine for a moment an individual who left school at 15, but who has successfully run a small business, say a delicatessen, for some years. This person decides to enrol in a TAFE Business Studies Certificate Course. The course takes two years full-time, but if exemptions were available for units like elementary bookkeeping, accounting, business practice etc., it would be possible to complete it in one year. Assuming that, in this case, the person did have the skills which justified the equivalent of one year's exemption, we can consider the benefits that result.

Firstly, the cost of training has been more or less halved and an individual, now possessing higher level skills, is available for work which makes use of these skills in one year rather than two. Furthermore, these advantages are accompanied by considerable personal benefits for the individual involved. There are, in addition, other less easily quantifiable factors. For instance, we could suggest that without the availability of the exemptions the person might have felt that two years of study was too long and required too large a financial commitment and decided therefore not to enrol for the course in the first place. On the other hand it could be suggested that once the first success was achieved in the form of a Certificate there could be motivation to go on to further study and consequently higher levels of skill.

3.0 ASSESSING EXPERIENCE FOR THE PURPOSE OF GRANTING EXEMPTION

3.1 Basic Requirements

Any process of assessment of experiential learning which involves the granting of exemption from course work must be educationally credible. The basic requirements of an acceptable exemption granting process are that:

> the course from which exemptions are being sought has a set of specified performance objectives which incorporate standards (that is, statements about what those people who have successfully completed the course can do and how well they can do it);

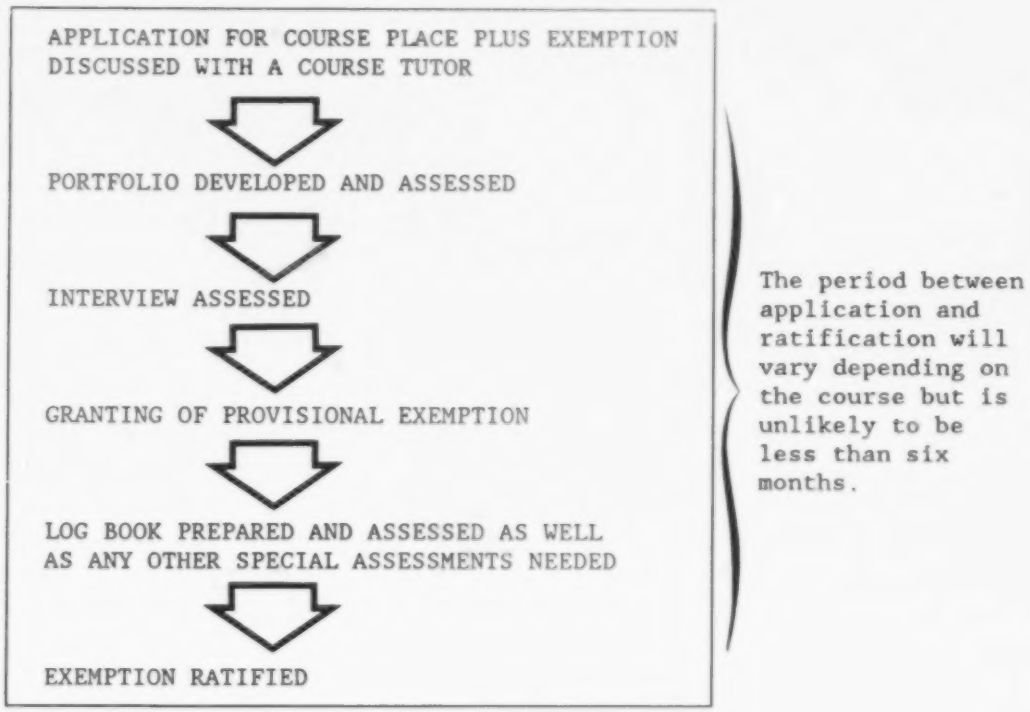
- the experiential learning possessed by the applicant who is seeking exemption is relevant to the outcomes of the course; and

- the assessment of the applicant's experiential learning is carried out by individuals who are recognised as competent and are able to give due regard to the maintenance of honesty and security.

3.2 The Proposed Process

Obtaining exemption would involve a preliminary step in which provisional exemption was first granted by an assessment panel which based its decision both on information presented in a portfolio and an interview. The student would then be expected to demonstrate in a work environment (that is, on the job) most of the competencies for which exemption has been granted. The demonstrated competencies would be recorded in a log book which was assessed by a panel set up to decide whether or not the exemptions granted should be ratified.

The steps in the process are shown below.


APPLICATION FOR COURSE PLACE PLUS EXEMPTION DISCUSSED WITH A COURSE TUTOR
PORTFOLIO DEVELOPED AND ASSESSED
INTERVIEW ASSESSED
GRANTING OF PROVISIONAL EXEMPTION
LOG BOOK PREPARED AND ASSESSED AS WELL AS ANY OTHER SPECIAL ASSESSMENTS NEEDED
EXEMPTION RATIFIED
The period between application and ratification will vary depending on the course but is unlikely to be less than six months.

These steps will now be considered in greater detail.

3.3 Planning Meetings with Course Tutor

Applications are processed by individuals designated as course tutors. Tutors have an important role in the process as they must meet with each applicant individually and provide guidance on:

- how much exemption can reasonably be claimed; and
- how to develop a portfolio to support the claimed exemption.

Tutors therefore need to be familiar with both the demands of the course and the day-to-day requirements of the job itself.

3.4 The Portfolio and its Assessment

The vast majority of assessments of experiential learning are based on 'portfolios'. The portfolio is an accumulation of information about a student's experiences and achievements organised into a manageable form for assessment. Portfolios generally contain:

- autobiographical narrative
- statement on special competencies
- assignments set by tutor
- work samples
- testimonials and references.

The assessment of a portfolio is a challenging task because each one is a unique collection of information. Therefore each portfolio requires its own unique set of assessments; there is no single method of portfolio assessment.

The autobiographical narrative and the statements on special competencies have to be checked against the performance objectives for which exemption is claimed.

The method used by the assessors is to treat the objectives as a checklist and to tick each one that is covered by narrative and statements.

Assignments set by the tutor are another element. They will have been set for a variety of reasons but the standards expected will not differ from those of any other student taking the course. Assignments would therefore be assessed as though they were a part of the normal course.

Work samples must be checked for both relevance and standards. The assessors judge them against scales devised for this purpose.

Testimonials and references are yet another element. These are treated as supportive evidence for the claimed competencies. Once again the checklist approach can be used which matches the competencies that are attested to in testimonials and references.

While separate judgments can be made about each of the above elements, in the final analysis it is a holistic judgment that is required. Portfolio assessment is a good example of where there is need for the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. The assessors are responsible for saying whether or not, after considering all the evidence, the requested provisional exemption should be granted.

3.5 The Interview and its Assessment

A great deal has been written about the conduct of interviews and this will not be repeated here. It is enough to say that the interview used in assessing experiential learning is structured and the interviewers must prepare their questions and plan carefully the way they will ask them.

The interviewers use a checklist which consists of the competency areas for which exemption is being claimed.

Questions are asked on these areas and a grading is given alongside each area using a scale which covers a range from 'outstanding' to 'below borderline'.

The same rating scale can be used to assess some of the applicant's other qualities such as:

- ability to communicate
- level of motivation
- personality.

These last three would be overall ratings made at the end of the interview.

3.6 Granting Provisional Exemption

Based on the evidence that is now before them, the three assessors arrive at a decision about how much provisional exemption they are prepared to grant the applicant.

The exemption is awarded provisionally because the certifying authority needs to be certain that applicants can actually perform the skills they claim to have learnt through life experiences.

It is not realistic to expect an applicant when applying for exemptions to provide evidence about all competencies that are claimed. This would make the portfolio an impossibly long and unmanageable document. And the interview can only 'sample' the competencies, otherwise it, also, would become a marathon performance. The only place where the full validation can take place is in the field, because only in the day-to-day work environment can a wide range of competencies be demonstrated and assessed.

The ratification or otherwise of the exemption granted relies heavily on the log book the applicant completes during the first few months of field work.

3.7 The Log Book and Other Assessments

Log books are used to record the performance of competencies for which the applicant has been given provisional exemption. Entries in the book are confined to those competencies for which exemption is being sought.

Ideally, all the competencies for which exemption has been given would make use of the log book. However, this will not always be possible and sometimes other methods of assessment must be used.

(These other kinds of assessment would be planned by the assessment panel and the applicant would be informed what was to be assessed, how it would be done and given time to prepare. The additional techniques that could be used include performance tests, simulations and oral tests.)

Log book entries are made only if they record relevant and significant events, so there is no fixed frequency recommended, although weekly entries would seem to be a minimal requirement. Entries are made after discussion with the work supervisor and each entry is attested to by the supervisor as a true record of the event described in the log book.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

- The assessment process uses an assessment panel which consists of people with recognised expertise.
- The panel members have been trained in the techniques of assessing portfolios and interview performance.
- The same panel assesses both portfolio and interview performance.
- Assessment of portfolios involves:
  - checking relevance of competencies claimed against course outcomes;
  - classifying work presented against rating scales, using a set of exemplars whenever possible.
- Assessment of interview performance is done using a structured interview and checklist.
- Provisional exemption is granted by the assessment panel.
- Assessment of performance continues on the job during the period in which provisional exemption has been granted. This is done mainly through the use of a log book to record competencies which are then attested to (where appropriate) by the supervisor.
- Other assessments may be specially designed when the applicant is in the field. For example, performance assessments, oral tests etc.
- Exemption is ratified on the basis of successful progress through all the above stages.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The methods that have been described here for the assessment of portfolios, interviews and performance on-the-job are not new. They are well tried and tested in other areas. What is needed now are decision-makers prepared to bring about their implementation for assessing experiential learning. Once such a decision were taken there would, of course, be establishment costs for staff and materials development to get the assessment processes underway. However, in a short time the savings in training costs and the benefits to the Australian workforce in general would be substantial.

We have now arrived at a situation where we must ask in the strongest of terms 'Why is so little being done to encourage Australians to make use of their experiences in life?'